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# SYMBOLIC MEANINGS IN ORIENTAL RUG PATTERNS: Part I<sup>1</sup>

Schuyler V.R. Cammann

Rugs and carpets from the Islamic World have delighted the peoples of the West for more than seven centuries.<sup>2</sup> From the time when they were first introduced to the Occident, their warm colors and soft rich textures have found a wide appeal, leading to their use as ornaments for palaces and churches, for public buildings and private homes. Because of this emphasis on decoration, and because the Westerners had no real understanding of Oriental traditions to provide deeper reasons for appreciation, the patterns have always been considered as purely decorative designs.<sup>3</sup> Even today, although the exhibition guides, sales catalogues, and books for collectors may list and discuss the Oriental rugs rather scientifically in regard to their probable origin and likely dates, with details about techniques of weaving and types of dyes, when they come to the patterns—called by various artificial and often inappropriate trade names—the superficial comments never really explain them.<sup>4</sup> It is now time to pay more attention to these long-neglected patterns: to see if they really were “merely ornamental,” or if they might have held definite meanings for the designers and weavers of these rugs and for those who originally commissioned and used them in the Eastern lands.

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<sup>1</sup>This study began as a number of lectures: one for the Textile Museum and the Washington Rug Society, in December 1970, another for the Oriental Club of Philadelphia, in February 1971, and several for the Wilmington Rug Group, etc. I regret not being able to present here all the illustrated material that I had on lecture slides to back up my statements; but many pictures can be found in books. I shall try to cite examples from those that are apt to be in the libraries of museums and private collectors, notably the following: Kurt Erdmann, *Oriental Carpets: an Essay on their History*, translated by Charles Grant Ellis, New York, 1962; Arthur U. Dilley, *Oriental Rugs and Carpets*, revised by W. S. Dimand, Philadelphia and New York, 1959; Ulrich Schürmann, *Oriental Carpets*, London, 1966 (to be abbreviated O.C.), and his *Central-Asian Rugs*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1969 (to be abbreviated C.A.R.); Wilhelm von Bode and Ernst Kühnel, *Antique Rugs from the Near East*, 4th revised ed., translated by C. G. Ellis, Braunschweig, 1958; Stanley Reed, *Oriental Rugs and Carpets* (Pleasures and Treasures series), New York, 1967; and *Turkish Rugs*, catalogue of an exhibition for the Washington Hajji Baba and the Textile Museum, Washington, 1968. With the exception of the last—and Schürmann's books, as noted—each of the above will be cited simply by the author's name.

<sup>2</sup>Following the customary American usage, I shall use the terms rug and carpet relatively interchangeably, except in the case of the very large palace carpets, for which “rug” seems unsuitable. We shall be considering primarily the Islamic rugs; those from the Far East—China, Mongolia, and Tibet—will be mentioned only when they illustrate cross-relationship in symbolism or designs.

<sup>3</sup>The extreme Western view is expressed by Ernst Cohn-Wiener, “On the Origin of Persian Carpet Patterns,” *Islamic Culture* (Hyderabad, India), Vol. 9, no. 4, Oct., 1937, p. 455.

<sup>4</sup>Attempts to explain the symbolism have been quite disastrous. Two early efforts that produced misleading ideas which are still being quoted were M. C. Ripley, *The Oriental Rug Book*, New York, 1904, and W. A. Hawley, *Oriental Rugs, Antique and Modern*, New York, 1913, republished by Dover in 1970. (The latter is still valuable for its pictures, but the text abounds in errors and misstatements.) Two recent sources of misinformation are Robert de Calatchi, *Oriental Carpets*, Rutland, Vt. and Tokyo, 1967, and Armen E. Hangelian, *Les Tapis d'Orient*, Paris, n.d. The latter devotes a dozen pages to misinterpreting a few simple, non-essential symbols, then ends by cautioning the reader, “Do not try to interpret the patterns.” But by far the worst was H. M. Raphaelian, *The Hidden Language of Symbols in Oriental Rugs*, New York, 1953.

In addition to this long-entrenched assumption that the rug patterns were "pure decoration," there are several more solid reasons why most museum curators, rug collectors, dealers, and scholars in this line of study still insist that there can be no symbolic meanings in them. In the first place, most of the rugs were woven in the Islamic World, by Muslims for Muslims; but Muslim scholars have never considered the subject of rugs worth writing about. They were interested in people, events, and ideas, not in things: to them these had no lasting importance.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, so very many people in the Islamic World have now lost touch with their religion, except for the outward observances required by local custom, and therefore have no real knowledge of the old religious traditions; while most of the rug dealers who served as middlemen for the West have been Armenians, hence Christians, who never knew—or cared to know—very much about the old Islamic traditions and folklore.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, the most rigidly orthodox Muslims themselves have always spurned pictorial art, refusing to accept pictures of any living things except flowers and trees, and thus they naturally rejected any type of symbolism that involved direct representations of birds, beasts, or men. Western scholars, knowing this, have simply assumed that the Islamic civilizations in general had no pictorial symbols to be expressed on the rugs or on anything else.

However, although the Orthodox Muslims have generally avoided direct pictorial symbolism—of the types known in Christian Art, or in the Buddhist and Taoist traditions of the Far East, or in the Buddhist and Hindu cultures of South and Southeast Asia—this does not mean that they did not possess symbolism of another kind, quite capable of expressing a full range of ideas. The mainstream of Islamic Tradition has always included a fondness for metaphor, which is boldly evident in Muslim literature, and this also found expression in patterns and designs, gradually developing into forms of graphic symbolism. In the Palace Art of most nations, and in the folk arts of less Arabicized regions such as Persia and Muslim India, these often became rather fully pictorial, sometimes even quite explicit. But elsewhere, since the Muslim artists were dealing largely with abstract ideas, preferring to suggest these rather than openly expressing them, the Islamic symbolism has seldom been noticed outside the Muslim World—especially not by Occidentals thinking in terms of the more concrete forms

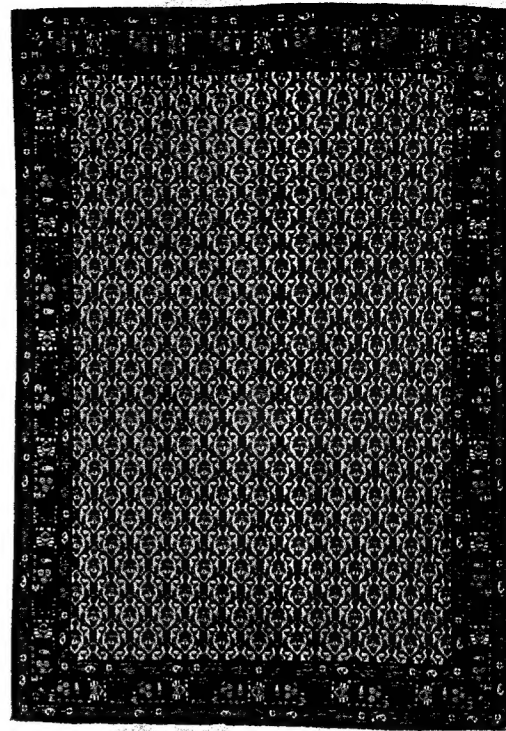


Fig. 1. A Sehna rug. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art: Given by the Haas Community Funds. 68-118-71.

of representation used in their own cultures.<sup>7</sup>

It was inevitable that the Muslim peoples would have tried to express some of their ideas in symbols. Man is a symbol-making animal; even the words in his daily speech are verbal symbols of people and things, actions and ideas. Moreover, the traditional arts of any people or nation in the past were rarely confined to mere decoration. In a living tradition, Art was a means of communication, another kind of language, a way of conveying without words some basic concepts of Philosophy and Religion—to educate or to inspire, to help put the individual in harmony with the Universe, or to give him magic protection. The vocabulary of that language consisted of symbols—in actual images or abstract motifs—and aesthetic pleasure could come as a by-product, from seeing how cleverly the desired meanings were conveyed.

The language of symbols might well be compared to a spoken language. Any foreign tongue can seem to be a meaningless jumble of odd noises—until one begins to hear distinct sounds, then clusters of sounds, and finally words with apparent meanings. However, no real translation can be accomplished without some knowledge of the grammar system by which one can learn to catch the meaning of a sentence as a whole, after which one can go back and decipher unfamiliar words by their relationship to others. Similarly, the language of pictured symbols in the art of an alien culture can present a meaningless confusion of sight impressions, until one gradually notes repeating elements in certain patterns, traces how these were combined into larger units of design, and finally comes to see that certain units seem to be expressing definite ideas, interrelating with

<sup>5</sup>As a result of this attitude among Muslim scholars, the Islamic World has until recently had no historians of Art and Architecture. These fields were simply ignored until Western scholars began to investigate them. Some Turkish scholars, in particular, have been trying to make up for lost time; but they have not done much with symbols.

<sup>6</sup>However, the architectural plans of the Armenian churches in Iran, as I have seen them at New Julfa, outside Isfahan, would seem to show that their Armenian builders also shared the same general Universe symbolism, the same ancient and international World-view, that underlies the symbolism on many of the Persian rugs.

<sup>7</sup>One attempt to treat Islamic symbolism was undertaken by Louis Massignon, in "Les Méthodes de réalisation artistique des peuples de l'Islam," *Syria* II, 1921, pp. 47-53, 149-160. However, this was highly theoretical, based upon reading rather than observation, and does not help very much in working with actual examples.

others to express broader meanings. But, just as in the case of the spoken sentence, real understanding of a given pattern only comes after one has first learned the grammar and syntax of symbols: that is to say, the system that governs their use and determines which ones can be combined, and in what ways. Only then is it possible to catch the overall message, after which one can decipher the smaller secondary elements by noting how they fit into the pattern as a whole.

Just as one cannot understand an entire sentence in a foreign tongue by knowing the meaning of one or two words, any efforts to comprehend the symbolism on a given rug by trying to interpret one or two of its minor elements is bound to fail.<sup>8</sup> An integral approach is the only effective one, as we shall see, because rug patterns were conceived as whole designs, in which the individual symbols were merely incidents, like isolated words in a sentence, contributing to the overall meaning in a greater or less degree but in themselves not expressing more than a fraction of the intended thought. Indeed, the lesser figures were often quite unnecessary to the general pattern, like flowery adjectives or filler-words used to give rhythm to a sentence.

Another basic similarity between these two kinds of language is that a pictorial symbol, like a spoken or written word, can contain several possible meanings, the appropriate one in a given case being determined by the context. But a symbol, even more than an individual word (except in poetry), may have meaning upon meaning, as though in layers, and several of them may be applicable at the same time, so an elaborate pattern could be read in different ways, depending on the viewer's knowledge or degree of sophistication, or even on his state of mind at the moment. Message upon message may continue to unfold as one becomes more and more familiar with a given pattern. This is one of the things that makes the study of rug designs so fascinating and so rewarding.

The symbolism in Islamic Art presents a difficult language for Occidentals, when they finally become aware that it exists. It is even difficult for those well trained in Western Art; perhaps more so for the latter, since they tend to approach it with a firm set of Occidental preconceptions and scholarly tools that cannot be applied. One has to bring to it an open mind, willing to learn and to try to understand a very different point of view. By contrast, a good knowledge of the arts of China and India can be a considerable asset, providing some initial keys.<sup>9</sup> First of all, one is then approaching one great Asian tradition from a basis in another, with some idea of how to begin. But more

importantly, just as any spoken or written language will contain some words handed down from earlier ones or borrowed from contemporary tongues that can offer clues to a beginner, Islamic Art has inherited, or taken as loans, a number of symbols and motives from other Asian traditions: so, if one already is familiar with the latter, he may have a headstart toward being able to identify and decipher the borrowed forms in the Islamic world. But one still must be cautious in drawing parallels, because—as we shall see—symbols like words can change both in form and in meaning with passing time or after being transferred to a new environment.

In short, no really accurate reading of Oriental rug patterns is possible without careful preparation, which involves gaining some precise knowledge of known symbols in other related areas of Asia. Lacking such a background, any efforts in this line would be almost as ineffectual as trying to translate a chapter of *Les Misérables* before having had even first-year French.

In the great cultural and religious traditions of the past, when men were conducting their lives in accordance with what Aldous Huxley, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and others have called "The Perennial Philosophy," the language of symbols was a vital entity.<sup>10</sup> There was hardly any such thing as an object of daily life that was decorated merely for ornament without some meaning. Life was all of a piece, in a harmonious Universe, and each household utensil, implement, or article of furniture, was fashioned or decorated so as to bear some relation to the whole grand design. Unfortunately for us, however, as long as a great tradition was alive nobody bothered to record the significance of things. Meanings were taken for granted, and it was assumed that everyone knew them. Then, when the tradition is broken and its language of symbols is dead, it becomes extremely difficult for outsiders to reconstruct it to the point where it is possible to recover specific meanings.

This is the case with the old Islamic civilization. Many of its old concepts and folk-beliefs have not come down to the present in even a rudimentary form. Thus, there is little point in asking a modern Turk, or Iranian, or Pakistani, what a 17th century pattern from his region might have meant. He will politely offer some spur-of-the-moment interpretation of his own, to avoid disappointing the questioner, but that will seldom have any validity. For any sort of real understanding of the rug patterns it is necessary to try to reconstruct the tradition and the mental set of an earlier time in those mid-Eastern lands, then hopefully to recover some of its almost-forgotten language of symbols.

investigation, at the same time strengthening the long-held impression that rug patterns are "pure decoration,"

<sup>8</sup>Occasionally, some bolder writer has come forward to suggest meanings for one or two common details, such as certain flowers, "the Tree of Life," or more abstract forms like the enigmatic *boteh* (see note 13, below), and gives to these imaginative interpretations based on his own inner feelings about them. These subjective pronouncements about non-essential elements of design are bound to fail, because the whole approach is wrong. The real meanings of an entire pattern cannot be deciphered through guessing the meaning of a few minor elements in it, even if the guesses were correct. The inevitable failures only serve to discourage further

<sup>9</sup>For the language of symbols in China, see S. Cammann, "Types of Symbols in Chinese Art," in *Studies in Chinese Thought*, edited by Arthur Wright, Chicago, 1953, pp. 195-231. (This also appeared as Memoir no. 75, among *The Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, December, 1953.)

<sup>10</sup>This attitude is explained in Huxley's Introduction to his *Perennial Philosophy*, New York and London, 1944, and in A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, New York, 1956, especially in chapter 2 of the latter.

### Abstract Patterns from Islamic Religious Traditions

In studying these Oriental rugs we should never forget that we are dealing with the products of a great unified civilization. The Islamic world stretched across whole continents, regardless of national boundaries: from the Atlantic coast in North Africa and Moorish Spain to the Bay of Bengal, and beyond to West China and to Indonesia. In this supra-national culture, there was not only a family resemblance in the forms, shapes, and decorations of the art and architecture across this vast expanse of territory, there was also a close relationship between all the arts within each of the five or six major cultural subdivisions. Thus, we can find the same type of "decoration" atop the bowl of a warrior's helmet as on the similarly shaped dome of a mosque, on a woolen carpet as on a leather book-cover, on a palace door as on a metal tray, with differences only in accessory details. The basic patterns and motives for all the arts and crafts drew primarily on one fundamental, all-pervading inspiration: the spiritual ideas and beliefs of the common faith.

Therefore, as a first step toward understanding this Islamic civilization and its art products, we of the West should read—at least in translation—the Koran and some other sacred books, some Arabic, Persian, and Turkish philosophical writings, and the works of the greater Muslim poets. For even in the poems—or especially in the poems, so rich in the metaphors which reveal the tendency toward symbolic thought—we can see how deeply certain religious views and attitudes affected peoples thinking. Then, as we begin to share in part the frame of mind of the Muslims of the past—more particularly the patrons, designers, and weavers of the rugs—we must look again at those complex patterns which have too long been belittled as "mere decoration."

When we first examine a rug from the Islamic world to try to analyze its pattern, we can immediately detect a marked difference in design and apparent intent between the field and the border. The main border pattern is generally bold and regular, with firmly repeating elements that return upon themselves to make a kind of endless belt or boundary band around the entire rug. By contrast, the background of the field—especially on the plainer rugs with more abstract decoration—seems much looser and less disciplined. If we study it carefully, we can see that this field pattern does not stop neatly at the border; instead, it seems to run on endlessly under and beyond it, as though it could continue on forever. We get an impression that the maker of the rug had had in his mind an endless pattern, and had simply set the border down over a small portion of it, isolating just this section, while the rest of it could be imagined as flowing on and on eternally. (See Fig. 1.)

We meet the concept of endlessness very frequently in Islamic thought.<sup>11</sup> God—under the name of Allah—is described as having Limitless Transcendence, Boundless Power, Infinite Mercy and Compassion, and His spiritual world above was believed to share in that Divine Infinity. This concept itself is difficult for the Western mind to grasp, and

we are accustomed to seeing patterns that fit neatly within trim borders or assigned frames, completely compact entities. To comprehend these infinite patterns, expressing a very different way of thinking, we must put aside our customary points of view and take a new look at some of the rugs that we have come to take for granted.

These continuous patterns—so characteristic of Middle Eastern design, and by no means confined to the rugs—did not originate in the Islamic tradition. The Louvre Museum in Paris displays an Assyrian stone slab of the 6th century B.C. which reproduces a rug or mat spread in a doorway, and the central field on this, enclosed by a continuous floral border, has a repeating pattern that seems to extend out under that border.<sup>12</sup> Although the idea was not original in Islam, the point is that the Muslim weavers took over this already-ancient device to express some of their most fundamental beliefs.

Patterns of Infinity have been very frequently used in the rug patterns of Persia and the adjoining lands to the north and east. We find it conveyed on such rugs as the Sarabands or Sehnas by countless lines of small flowers or *boteh*,<sup>13</sup> the outermost ones being cut in half by the inner margin of the borders,<sup>14</sup> or by the simple repeating motives on the Afshārī rugs<sup>15</sup> or the Turkomans;<sup>16</sup> or expressed more elaborately in the complex overall designs known as the Herātī pattern<sup>17</sup> or the *Mīnā-khāne* (literally "Hall of Mirrors") pattern that was so popular among the Kurdish weavers.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of Endlessness is even more arrestingly portrayed on some of the large court carpets from Ushak in Old Turkey, which are so well represented in the Philadelphia Art Museum and at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware (see Fig. 2).<sup>19</sup> On these, the giant incomplete, or

<sup>11</sup>The concept of Endlessness even appears in one form of magic square that was a favorite among the Muslims. See S. Cammann, "Islamic and Indian Magic Squares," Part I, *History of Religions*, Vol. 8, no. 3, 1969, pp. 196-198. In this "Persian continuous method," the cycle of numbers can keep repeating indefinitely, as one follows them around and around within the simple diagram.

<sup>12</sup>This old Assyrian carpet reproduced in stone is shown in one of the Mesopotamian galleries in the basement of the Louvre.

<sup>13</sup>Since the *boteh* is an abstract form, appearing in several variations, each of which may have had a different origin, it seems better to keep this Persian name for it. Certainly the attempts to name it in English, as "pear," "palmette," "half-palmette," "cypress," etc., are not only poor descriptions but also meaningless interpretations. Sometimes, a specific context may suggest a probable meaning in that case; otherwise, guesses are futile.

<sup>14</sup>For Sarabands and Sehnas, see S. Reed, fig. 90, p. 93, and fig. 87, p. 91, also fig. 73, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup>For an Afshārī example, see Preben Liebetrau, *Oriental Rugs in Color*, New York and London, 1963, pl. 17.

<sup>16</sup>For Turkoman examples, see S. Reed, fig. 79, p. 84, and figs. 95 and 96, pp. 100 and 101, and the many in Schürmann, *C.A.R.* See also Christopher Dunham Reed, *Turkoman Rugs*, Cambridge, 1966, notably the Ersari example from the Textile Museum's collection, fig. 45, on p. 57.

<sup>17</sup>For two typical examples of the Herātī pattern, see Dilley, pl. XXIV.

<sup>18</sup>For the *mīnā-khāne* pattern, see Dilley, pl. XXVII, lower left, or Hawley, *Oriental Rugs*, pl. 26, opposite p. 114. The latter shows the pattern well, but it is an atypical example, since the design only runs out under the border on three sides, and seems to stop on the fourth (left) side.

<sup>19</sup>For other Ushak carpets, see Erdmann, figs. 140 and 142, and color plate VIII, and Ernst J. Grube, *The World of Islam*, pl. 72, p. 120.



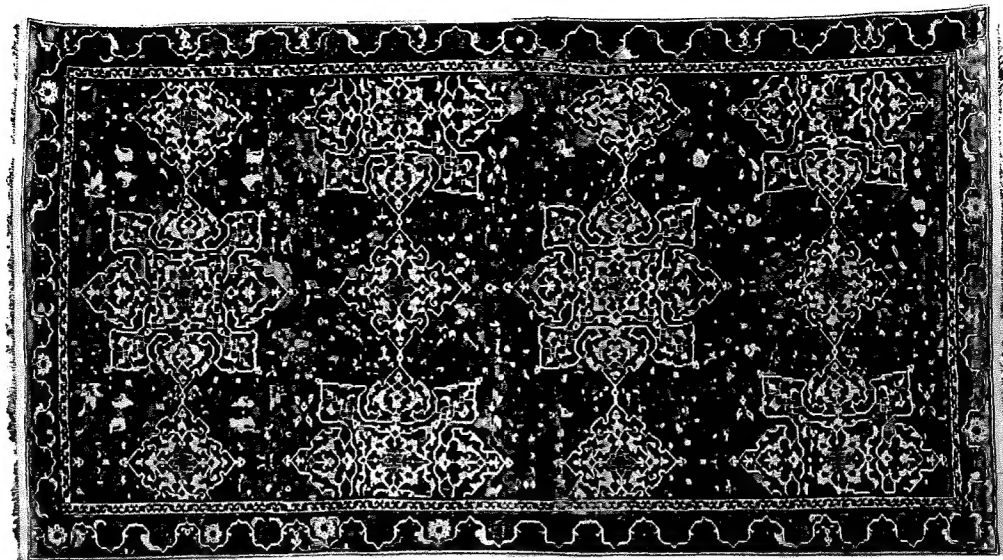


Fig. 2. An Ushak carpet. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Joseph Lees Williams Memorial Collection. Assembled by Charles F. Williams; bequest of Mrs. Mary A. Williams. 55-65-16.

interrupted, stars or medallions at the sides and ends of the inner field, as well as the delicate filling patterns in the background behind them, must be imagined as continuing on out under the border indefinitely.

Often one of the "Star Ushaks" has an apparently "extra" repeat of a medallion, or part of one, that makes the lengthwise spread appear to us as unduly asymmetric.<sup>20</sup> We examine this carpet more carefully to see if it might have been cut down in the past to alter its length; but we find no evidence of such reworking. This disturbs us. We are unaccustomed to such asymmetry so we feel that the pattern must somehow be "wrong" or defective. However, on the field pattern of an expensive Ushak carpet, woven for Imperial patrons at the height of Ottoman power, there could have been no question of mistakes. These patterns that seem incomplete to us are too often encountered to have been accidents.

Apparently, when the Ushak weavers approached the desired length for a carpet, they simply terminated the field pattern and completed the border. Since they were working with a figuratively endless, infinite pattern, it did not matter to them, or to their patrons, where they stopped. The resulting effect of incompleteness on an otherwise definite surface area creates a paradox, if one stops to think about it. However, a suddenly-realized paradox can startle a person into rethinking about things he has too long been taking for granted: It was by means of such paradoxes that the Sufi teachers of Islam—like other Eastern sages—taught their disciples to glimpse Reality behind surface appearances.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>See Grube, *loc. cit.*, or Erdmann, fig. 142.

<sup>21</sup>The parables of Jesus involve verbal paradoxes, and so do the *koan* statements of the Zen Buddhist monks. The mystical-minded of many faiths usually share similar convictions; and it has been said that a Zen mystic, a Sūfī sage, a member of the Hassidim, or a Christian mystic like San Juan de la Cruz, if they could forget the sectarian differences that set apart their faiths, might converse together on a common plane of understanding. In short, one need not be a Muslim to sense the spiritual message in the pattern on an Ushak carpet.

Another aspect of the Spiritual world, in Muslim thinking, was its Indefinability. They felt that no mortal could define or describe the Transcendent Unity, which was God, any more than he could put imagined limits to Transcendence; and the same applied to the Spiritual Reality behind the illusory surface features in His Creation. In words, one could only express all this by dealing in negatives, indirectly defining the Indefinable by saying what it was not; but in patterns and designs on things, the idea of Divine Indefinability and the essential indefinability of the Life of the Spirit, the Muslims felt, could best be suggested by emphasizing "the Dissolution of Matter."

Several Western students of Islamic Art and Architecture have pointed out how the solid mass of a mosque dome, or palace room, or even a metal box, could be as it were dissolved, by breaking up the surface into ever-smaller areas of decoration, so that the whole would take on an appearance of insubstantial lightness.<sup>22</sup> Often this was accomplished by endlessly repeating small-scale figures that go on and on, and seem to slip out beyond any arbitrarily placed bordering elements, such as the edge of a wall or the straight line of a door frame, so that the concept of Infinity was combined with the idea of the Dissolution of Matter.

This fundamental principle of the Dissolution of Matter, expressed in intricate arabesques, produced stunning effects on mosque walls and minarets, and especially on the outside surfaces and the ceilings of bubblelike domes, to which it gave an impression of airy lightness, contradicting their massive weight.<sup>23</sup> This principle was also applied to the floors. In mosques or in palaces, small patterns were endlessly repeated on the floors in stone mosaic or tilework;<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup>See John D. Hoag, *Western Islamic Architecture* (in The Great Ages of World Architecture series), New York, 1963, pp. 9 and 28-29, and E. J. Grube, *The World of Islam*, p. 11, left column.

<sup>23</sup>An extreme example of the Dissolution of Matter is presented on the ceiling of the Hall of the Abencerages in the Alhambra at Granada. See Hoag, *ibid.*, fig. 68. See also how the principle was carried out in another way in another hall there, as shown in fig. 69.

<sup>24</sup>Ornamental tile floors were not used in Persia, but they are familiar in other Muslim areas.



Fig. 3. A "Lotto" rug. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

and plainer surfaces, or even these, were broken up by a seemingly boundless spread of rugs and carpets, often overlapping, each adding to the effect of dematerialization by the smaller design units of its own pattern.

This concept, then, can easily account for the endless repeats on some of the earliest known Turkish rugs from the Seljuq period,<sup>25</sup> and the astounding diversity of intricate ornament on the Mameluk carpets of pre-Ottoman Egypt, before the Turkish Conquest in 1517.<sup>26</sup> It also gives a plausible explanation for the repeated stars and octagons, and extra fillers in other shapes, that break up the background on the Caucasian rugs,<sup>27</sup> which Western writers have wrongly, or inadequately, ascribed to a *horror vacui*, a distaste for empty space on the part of the weavers.

On many Central Asian rugs, such as those woven by the Tekke or Yomud, and other Turkoman tribesmen, the

principles of Infinity and the Dissolution of Matter seem to have been represented simultaneously, and one can look at the pattern on such a rug from either point of view, or from both together.<sup>28</sup> This compound viewpoint is obvious again in the patterns on several classes of Turkish rugs that were woven in Anatolia during the 15th and 16th centuries and shipped in great quantities to Europe. There, they have often been given European type-names associating them with certain Western artists who included them in their paintings.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the most direct expression of the idea of breaking up a surface by a pattern which also runs out under the border is shown on that class of Turkish rugs described as "Lottos" because they appear so often in the backgrounds of pictures by the Italian painter Lorenzo Lotto (see Fig. 3).<sup>30</sup> What is represented by the golden latticework with jewel-like blue insets on the vivid red ground of these so-called "Lotto rugs?" We may never know for sure the full significance of this pattern; but the glittering design of the field, suggesting a golden grillwork set with sapphires, extending on endlessly beyond the frame of its border, must have suggested, to at least some of the Turks who first viewed it, the infinite splendor of Paradise.

The pattern on the so-called "Holbein rugs," made in Anatolia at about the same period, also embodies the principle of Infinity in the continuous extension of its pattern which runs out under the border, while the idea of the Disintegration of Matter is further conveyed by the frequent repetition of medallions and of the filler elements between them. Even the medallions themselves display both these qualities. The outer framework on each consists of a knotted cord that returns upon itself, diverted—but not broken—by eight small "endless knots," and the very core of each medallion is broken up by being colored in two different shades in an asymmetric diagonal manner.<sup>31</sup>

On the white-ground type, misnamed "bird rugs," produced in Anatolia at the same time as the two preceding varieties but apparently persisting longer, not only is the design continuous, effectively breaking up the surface by frequently repeated figures, but a further sense of disintegration is produced by the centripetal device of four leaf-like elements (the parts that have been misnamed "birds") which seem to be whirling around a common center. Each line of these suggests a row of spinning pinwheels, and as one gazes at the pattern, just a slight transfer of attention creates an optical illusion, in which the focal center of each spinning element shifts to the adjoining line, so the leaves start to whirl again in a new way. This illusory effect imparts a lively sense of motion to the whole pattern, dissolving any vestige of rigidity. (See Fig. 4)<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup>See the Turkoman examples cited in note 16.

<sup>29</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 25-30 for Turkish rug types that became popular in Europe.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, plate I, shows a typical Lotto rug. See also Dilley, pl. XXXVIII, top, right.

<sup>31</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 25, 27, and 29, for some typical Holbein rugs.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, fig. 148, shows a typical white-ground "bird rug." See also Schürmann, *O.C.*, no 12, and Grube, *op. cit.*, fig. 80, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 1 to 7, for the early Turkish rugs.

<sup>26</sup>For Mameluk carpets, see Schürmann, *O.C.*, pp. 27 and 28, and Erdmann, pl. II, and Grube, *World of Islam*, pl. 71, p. 119.

<sup>27</sup>For some typical Caucasian patterns, see Dilley, pls. L and LI, and of course Schürmann's magnificently illustrated *Caucasian Rugs*, Braunschweig, 1967.



### Three Types of Design: Three Degrees of Stylization

Another basic principle of Islamic thought that influenced its Art was closely related to the idea of the Dissolution of Matter. This has been called "the Denaturalization of Nature." At a very early period in the development of Islamic culture, its spiritual leaders wanted to forestall any tendency toward attempting to deify Nature as the Classical World had done, since they realized that this could lead to another form of idolatry: a giving to the created some of the reverence that belongs only to the Creator. Thus, they generally expected the artists and decorators to avoid painting pictures of living things, meaning men or animals. Even when people did plants or trees, they were encouraged to represent them in a rather severely stylized manner, so as to alter or dissolve the actual forms, and make them decorative rather than pictorial. (There is nothing about this in the Koran, but several references to this attitude, ascribed to the Prophet himself, are listed among the *Ḥadīth* or "Traditions.")<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it should not surprise us to see that the rug-weavers, like the tile-makers and the workers in metals, often turned flowers into ornamental stars or rosettes, while still viewing them as "flowers," and that the weavers also stylized animals and birds into floral forms or mere stick figures, or—as on the Kazākh "dragon rugs"—reduced them to scarcely recognizable blobs of color.<sup>34</sup>

Partially because of the same kind of religious views, but also because of artistic principles derived from Chinese painting traditions absorbed during the period when the Mongols dominated Iran, even the most "naturalistic" of the Persian or Mughal Indian miniature paintings were still not direct reproductions of Nature in the Western sense, and the "picture carpets" which may have been inspired by the miniatures, or even designed by the same artists, are still less so.<sup>35</sup> Everything on them has been subjected to some degree of stylization, in order to subordinate the individual elements so as to increase the decorative effect of the whole. Also, the pattern designers seem to have appreciated the fact that excess detail is difficult to reproduce in rug-knotting, while at the same time a more generalized figure offers greater scope for the viewer's imagination and hence increases his enjoyment.

Too often we hear a glib statement, repeated in many rug books and in Western writings on Islamic Art in general, declaring that Persian Art was more free in displaying figures of men and animals because members of the Shi'a sect—which predominated in Iran since 1500—were permitted to represent them, while members of the Sunnī, or Orthodox, branch of the faith were not. This is simply untrue. It is just one of those irresponsible remarks that gets bandied about from one uncritical writer to another, without reference to historical facts. Actually, all

<sup>33</sup>See note 36, below.

<sup>34</sup>For small figures of animals and men, see Schürmann, O.C., p. 54. Many other examples are shown in his book *Caucasian Rugs*. For a typical Kazākh dragon rug, see Dilley, pl. XLVII.

<sup>35</sup>See Dilley, pl. XXXV, and Grube, *op. cit.*, pl. 101, p. 159.

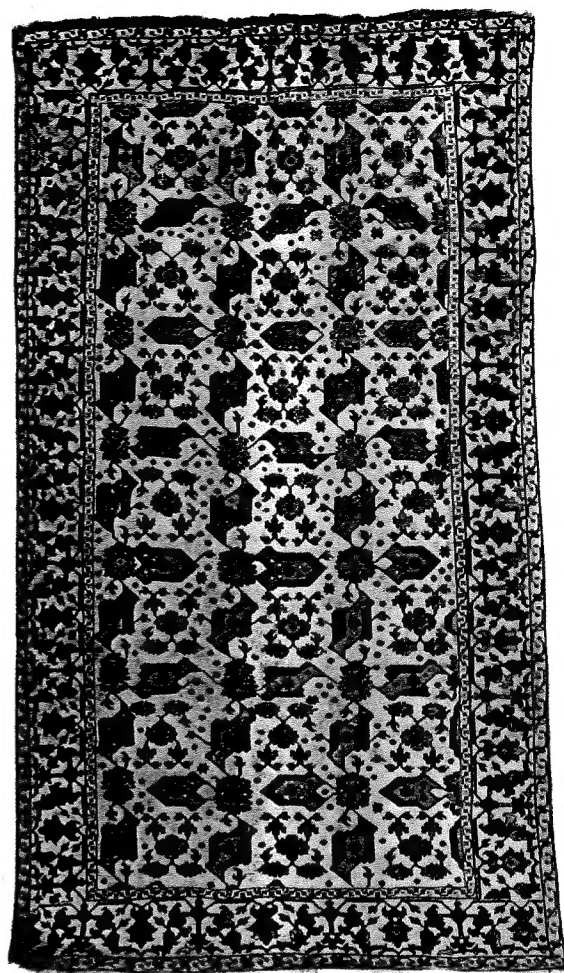


Fig. 4. Turkish "bird" rug. The Textile Museum. R34.20.1.

Muslims were warned, by the statements in the Traditions ascribed to the Prophet, that they must not draw figures of men or animals;<sup>36</sup> but, in practice, these strictures were less rigorously applied in the palace art, produced for royal or princely patrons. From the court of Mughal India, which was preponderantly Sunnī, and from that of Ottoman Turkey, which was very strictly so, we have nearly as many painted representations of these supposedly forbidden subjects as we do from Safavid Iran, which was fanatically Shi'ite. The Muslim sovereigns, like rulers elsewhere, were less scrupulous about such matters.<sup>37</sup> It was the highly con-

<sup>36</sup>There is no statement banning figures in the Koran, in spite of the prevalent opinion among Western writers that there is. The Koran only speaks against making and worshipping idols. See Sir Thomas W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam*, Dover ed., New York, 1965, Chapter I, pp. 1-40, and Massignon, "Méthodes de réalisation," pp. 47-49.

<sup>37</sup>Royal disregard of the feeling against the use of human figures was in no sense a late development or deviation. The decorations in the palaces of the earliest princes of Islam, in Jordan and in the Syrian Desert, had sculptured and painted figures that included people. Examples of the former are shown on the Mshatta facade, preserved in the Pergamon Museum, East Berlin, and I have personally seen human figures in stucco in the Archaeological Museum in Jordanian Jerusalem (before it was taken over by Israel), which had come from such a palace. See also Grube, *op. cit.*, fig. 6, p. 33.

servative common people, under the direction of very literal-minded spiritual leaders, who were the most unyielding in this respect. That accounts for the general avoidance of figures in the popular weavings of Anatolia, the Caucasus region, and Russian Turkestan. Though even from those areas we can find exceptions in the form of highly stylized—but still identifiable—figures of birds, beasts, and men.<sup>38</sup>

It is easier to understand the rug patterns if we keep in mind the fact that Islamic Art in general had three fundamentally distinct forms of expression, depending on the patrons:

- 1) *Mosque Art*, for the places of formal worship. This was strictly non-representational, with the possible exception of floral elements in design. It included objects for religious use, such as prayer rugs or the larger carpets to cover the floors, or those specially woven to decorate famous shrines, like the ones at Ardebil in Northern Iran, to be described in Part III, below.
- 2) *Palace Art*, for the royal or imperial courts. Here, artists could quite freely represent flowers or animals, or even people, depending on the relative liberality of their patrons' views. Many fine Persian carpets fall into this group, especially those from the time of the early Safavids (16th and 17th centuries).
- 3) *Popular Art*, the art of the common people. Generally this was strictly non-representational—except for flowers, and even these were often transformed into stars, or stylized beyond recognition. However, we sometimes find on village rugs animals, birds, and people, guardedly represented in very simple forms or mere stick figures. The more conservative nomad tribesmen usually avoided even these.

One marked feature of the Popular Art was its insistence on maintaining old tradition, compelling a weaver to repeat the patterns of his or her forbears as exactly as possible, and permitting liberties only with some of the non-essential filler elements in the backgrounds. With time, or in more careless hands, this rote-copying might become rather slipshod, until mistakes crept in, finally resulting in garbled and confused patterns. This process was hastened when the reasons behind the various patterns and motifs began to fade with the breakdown of tradition. This was most forcibly accomplished by the comparatively recent "impact of the West," but tribal wars, larger conflicts between nations, and forced migrations have also scrambled peoples, and the displaced weavers have often borrowed motifs from their new neighbors without understanding them.

Two of the most troubled areas have been the Caucasus region and the Turkoman steppes. Patterns from these areas after about 1800 show the inevitable results of constant, often uncomprehending, borrowing from other peoples, and recopying by later weavers who did not really know

what they were doing. Therefore, many details in these patterns probably can never be fully interpreted, although some general meanings continued on in the overall designs. And yet, the rugs of these two areas still hold much of interest for the symbol-searcher, because strong conservatism and fear of change among illiterate mountain villagers and desert tribesmen have often preserved symbolic elements that have been discarded elsewhere in recent times.

### Written Inscriptions

A principal characteristic in the first two forms of Islamic Art as listed above was the use of Arabic script as a means of decoration. Arabic was the common religious language all across the Islamic World, and its script was borrowed for writing other tongues, in nations under Muslim rule.<sup>39</sup> Fine handwriting—beautiful calligraphy—was appreciated by religious leaders and courtiers as well as the scholars, and even the illiterate could appreciate its decorative effects,<sup>40</sup> so it was much used in architectural details and on many articles of daily use.<sup>41</sup> The Arabic script was unusually effective for decoration, because the lack of initial capitals made it possible to emphasize any other letters in a word, if this would create a more ornamental effect,<sup>42</sup> and many final letters could be written with a sweeping flourish.

The most decorative styles of writing followed forms originally developed at the city of Kufa in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), and hence are called "Kufic." In the architectural decoration on mosques, and in designs on helmets, brass bowls, etc., we often find some of the lengthened vertical strokes of this script sprouting leaves at the top—making "foliated Kufic"—or bursting into floral displays, for "floreated Kufic,"<sup>43</sup> or two adjoining strokes might be interlaced to make "braided Kufic." Examples of the last recall—and perhaps were inspired by—the Endless Knot motif so common in the Buddhist lands, especially in China.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Persian (*fārsī*), various dialects of Turkish including Ottoman, Urdu in Old India and modern Pakistan, and even Malay, were all once written in Arabic script. *Fārsī* still is, but the Turkish of Modern Turkey and the Malay of Indonesia (*Bahasa Indonesia*) are now written in Roman letters, and the Turkic languages in the U.S.S.R. are usually written in Cyrillic.

<sup>40</sup>For Islamic calligraphy and forms of script, see A. U. Pope (editor), *A Survey of Persian Art*, Vol. II, chapter 46, and Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Iconography of Religions, XXII.1), Leyden, 1970.

<sup>41</sup>For decorative uses of Arabic script see Grube, *op. cit.*, pls. 49 and 50, pp. 86 and 87; and figs. 57, p. 105, 67, p. 111, and 76, p. 136.

<sup>42</sup>For example, the middle letters of a word in Arabic might be exaggerated in length above and below the median line to make it fill a diamond-shaped space more effectively; and the down-sweeping strokes of certain letters (such as *mīm* and *wāw*) could be diminished, while the soaring lines of others (such as *ʿalif* and *lām*) were extended upward to unusual heights, in order to create an impression of Heavenward aspiration.

<sup>43</sup>Some of the possible varieties of Arabic script are illustrated in Grube, fig. 2, p. 12. To see how some of the highly decorative kinds were used, see references in note 41, above, and D. T. Rice, *Islamic Art*, New York, 1965, fig. 88, p. 89, and figs. 134 and 135 (on same numbered pages).

<sup>44</sup>In my lectures, I showed examples of braided Kufic, incorporating endless knots, from the mediaeval Seljuq hospital in the Gök Medrese, at Sivas, in Anatolia; but the general idea is illustrated in Rice, *op. cit.*, fig. 200, p. 195, in the medallions at the upper corners of the wall. Erdmann,

<sup>38</sup>Schürmann's *Caucasian Rugs* shows numerous examples of stylized figures.



Calligraphic decoration is less common on rugs than on other things. Religious texts in particular have generally been avoided on carpets intended for the floor, lest they be defiled by being stepped on, though they do appear on the blue *zīlū* carpeting that one often sees spread in the courtyards of mosques in Iran.<sup>45</sup> It is on prayer rugs that we are most likely to find sacred inscriptions, placed there to inspire meditation. But, aside from some rare exceptions—as on rugs that may have been intended to hang on a wall, to serve as a *mihrāb* for a temporary mosque<sup>46</sup>—these are generally confined to the border. They usually begin halfway up one side, run across the top, and halfway down the other side—carefully avoiding the lower portion, to prevent their being stepped on.<sup>47</sup> These inscriptions were almost always rendered in a flexible running script, such as *naskh* or *ta'liq*; but we sometimes find a rectangular cartouche, or a matching pair of them, carrying a sentence in an angular style called "square Kufic."<sup>48</sup> This form of cartouche and the script itself may have derived from Chinese seals or seal impressions.<sup>49</sup>

The Emperors of China used to confer carved seals of metal or stone on other kings (usually proclaiming them as their vassals); and on these the Chinese characters were contrived in an especially angular "seal script," while the language of the recipient was rendered in a similar style, as far as possible, to conform with this. Thus, even the flowing curves of Arabic writing could be reduced to straight lines on these presentation seals. Such seals were undoubtedly possessed by the Qāra-Khitai rulers of mediaeval Turkestan, and probably by the eastern Seljuq rulers; but certainly the Mongol princes of Central Asia and Iran had them, during the 13th and 14th centuries. In fact, under this influence, the latter used seals in Mongolian script with squared-off wording, which could have provided a second motivation for the extensive use of "square Kufic" which proliferated in their time.<sup>50</sup>

in fig. 21, shows the endless knots in both field and border of a rug in a 15th century Persian miniature, but there is no writing of any kind involved here.

<sup>45</sup>I have seen some especially fine examples of *zīlū* carpets at mosques in Qazwin and Hamadan, and have watched them being woven behind the main Bazaar in Isfahan; but they seem to be unknown to the Western World. For a description of the *zīlū* technique, see Hans Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1966, pp. 210-211.

<sup>46</sup>See Dilley, pl. XLII, lower right, for an exceptional prayer rug, with writing all the way around it. This might have been hung to indicate a *mihrāb*: Especially on military campaigns in non-Muslim countries, it would have been necessary to construct temporary mosques; and merchants travelling with caravans might have felt the need of them on Fridays. For other prayer rugs used in this way, see note 96.

<sup>47</sup>See Bode and Kühnel, fig. 117, p. 160, and Dilley, pl. XV. An interesting variant is shown in Dilley, pl. XLIII, where the lower part of the rug has only faked writing to fill the lower panels.

<sup>48</sup>The first two examples referred to in the previous note show such cartouches.

<sup>49</sup>The prayer rug in Dilley, pl. XV, shows the cartouches executed in red, the color of Chinese seal ink, thereby increasing the resemblance to seal impressions.

<sup>50</sup>A number of documents in Mongol script are hung on the walls of the Archaeological Museum in Teheran (2nd floor). But they are hung on their

Apart from the rare religious texts, we find on certain Persian rugs—especially on palace carpets from the Safavid period, during and after the reign of Shāh 'Abbās—cartouches in the border containing lines of poetry, often worked in threads of precious metals.<sup>51</sup> The poems are in Persian, but the writing looks the same to a casual observer, since the Persian script was taken directly from Arabic, with only minor changes. Lastly, we sometimes find brief dedications, or the names of makers or donors, often with the date of weaving,<sup>52</sup> rather unobtrusively included in the design.<sup>53</sup> A particular example is the inscription at one end of the famous Ardebil rug in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (see Fig. 19). Some modern rugs may have such an inscription on the outer edge of the border, apart from the actual decoration.

It is important for the rug-analyst to distinguish between writing and non-writing. Many Western writers fail to make this distinction. Parroting one another's mistakes, they keep referring to certain border designs, found on the old Turkish "Lotto" or "Holbein" rugs,<sup>54</sup> or on more modern ones from Shirvān and elsewhere in the Caucasus,<sup>55</sup> as "Kufic borders," wrongly assuming that they represent writing in Kufic script. Actually, these borders do not contain any true letters, or make real words. On some rugs, this form of decoration may look near enough to writing to be called "simulated Kufic," but more often there is no remote resemblance to any form of script<sup>56</sup> (see Fig. 3 for an example).

The first and most obvious explanation for this class of border designs is that the rhythmically repeated connected figures in the outer border broke up the surface, and since the design was continuous, returning back upon itself, it expressed the idea of Endless Continuity, so fundamental in Islamic border designs.

sides—since the modern Iranians assumed that the Mongol script must have been written horizontally, as theirs is, whereas, it was actually written vertically downward—so the seal impressions are also resting on their sides in a very misleading fashion. Arthur Upham Pope thought that the square Kufic was a contribution of the Mongol rule in Persia; but examples of it have been found on monuments in Eastern Iran which date from an earlier period, so that cannot have been true. See A. U. Pope, *An Introduction to Persian Art*, London, 1930, p. 13. (This script is also called "rectangular Kufic," but "square" is more appropriate.)

<sup>51</sup>See Bode and Kühnel, figs. 65-67, pp. 97-99; and Erdmann, fig. 53.

<sup>52</sup>After one has mastered the Arabic numerals (which are fairly easy to learn), there are various books in which can look up the date to find the Christian equivalent to the Muslim one, notably, G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Muslim and Christian Calendars*, London and New York, 1963. But, as many readers doubtless know, there is a simpler way to do it yourself. Simply divide the Muslim date by 33, and subtract the answer from the original date; then add 622 to the remainder, and you will have the A.D. equivalent.

<sup>53</sup>An unusual exception is the famous hunting carpet in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan, which has the dating inscription in its very center. However, that may have been done because this was a royal carpet, so in actual use this spot would have been concealed under the throne or cushion of the King, and thus would not be visible. See fig. 20, above.

<sup>54</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 19, 21, 22, 26, 27, 35 and 36.

<sup>55</sup>See *ibid.*, pl. 111, and Schürmann, O.C., pp. 57, 59 and 60; and note that in the example on p. 54 in the latter one can see individual motifs from this type of border used independently in the field pattern.

<sup>56</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 25 and 41, for especially non-Kufic "Kufic borders."

### Border Patterns on Islamic Rugs

We have seen that the background field pattern on most Oriental rugs was generally intended to portray symbolically the boundless, timeless World of the Spirit; and Part III will demonstrate that this idea was even more graphically expressed on the pictorial carpets of Safavid Persia, which presented very detailed views of the Heavenly World and Paradise. By contrast, the border patterns with their boldly repeating motifs symbolized a different aspect of the Universe. The rhythmically recurring elements of the border designs, parading in continuous succession, suggested the orderly progress of Time, as it proceeds in regularly recurring cycles.

In Orthodox Muslim History and Science, Time is linear, advancing in a straight line; but the Turkish and Iranian peoples retained (behind this) a deep sense of an older cyclical concept of Time. For the Turks still clung to the East Asian Zodiac system, while the Persians' ceremonial emphasis on the New Year (*Nau Rūz*) treated each year as a new and complete round.<sup>57</sup> The annual cycle was depicted in many ways in Old Asian traditions, and it was a constant feature of borders on many things besides rugs. On the latter, however, a continuous border was a constant characteristic.

The only real exceptions occur on rugs from Anatolia, where even the Ushak weavers were not careful about turning corners to make a smooth transition, and often broke the patterns there, thus losing the continuity.

On many rugs, the concept of on-going Time, expressed in the regular succession of repeated elements in the border, was further enhanced by inverting every second motif—sometimes giving this a darker color as well—which added a suggestion of the alternating contrast between night and day in the everlasting round.<sup>58</sup>

One of the most widespread and obvious metaphors for passing Time was an endless vine—technically known by the French term *rinceau*—giving off flowers or leaves at regular intervals.<sup>59</sup> Border motifs based on this were very popular in China, where they were interpreted as conveying the idea of Everlasting Life or Immortality for an individual, or as expressing the continuity of his family—or the race—giving forth at intervals a new child, or another generation, symbolized by the flowers or seed-crammed fruits that sprang from the vine. The same idea seems to have been current in other parts of Asia, although in Muslim lands the border patterns representing this were usually more strongly conventionalized.<sup>60</sup> When they did not use the

rinceau on the main border-band, they often placed it on one or more guard-stripes.<sup>61</sup>

Often the *rinceaux* were simplified beyond easy recognition, as in such border patterns as "the leaf and wine-cup" (a most inappropriate name),<sup>62</sup> or those having repeated S-shapes which often had no direct contact with each other.<sup>63</sup> We also find bunches of grapes replacing the flowers or larger fruits—as on the Marasālī prayer rugs of the Caucasus<sup>64</sup>—or even flowers or fruits alone, perhaps shown facing in alternate directions but lacking a unifying vine.

In view of the specific Time symbolism on the border, even though the border and the field pattern of an Oriental rug each expressed a different order of existence—one concerned with Time, in contrast to timeless Heaven<sup>65</sup>—they were intimately related. Together they depicted a combination of the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the spiritual. Thus, the rug was in this sense a Universe in miniature.

The Old Asian idea of the Universe (to be described more fully in Part II) led the men of old to think that Heaven beyond the Sky was separated from our human world by a gate in the Sky, the mythical "Sky Door." Therefore, since the rug-border, on which the Time-bands were figured, served as a frame through which to catch a glimpse of the Heavenly World as symbolized by the inner field, it was natural for them to regard the entire border as representing the Sky-Door. In terms of their world-view, this symbolism was especially fitting: because, just as the Sky-Door symbolically marked the transition point between the Human World and the World of the Spirit, the rug-border physically made a transition from the Spiritual World—or an earthly reflection of it—at the center, to the everyday World of Men in the house or tent around it.

In terms of this same Old Asian cosmology, the World of the Spirit which was symbolized by the inner field was considered to be the source of Divine Protection, the Fount of Wisdom, the Ultimate Destination, and the Guarantor of Success in marriage, war, hunting, trading ventures, etc. The people of Asia (Muslim or non-Muslim) believed that if one could somehow keep oneself symbolically in contact with Heaven above, and in harmony with the Universe in general—both the microcosmic universe of one's own surroundings and the greater macrocosm—then one would be in line to receive all these much-desired benefits. Thus, any-

<sup>57</sup>For the pre-Muslim notions of Time that persisted on in Islamic lands, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York, 1959, Chapter II, pp. 68 ff., esp. p. 78; also the reference in Part II, note 54.

<sup>58</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 51, 52, 63, 88 and 89, for various examples of alternating border motifs. Massignon has pointed out that Muslims tend to think of Time as a succession of instants rather than a continuous stream (*Méthodes*, p. 155); so they could have regarded each repeated star or flower in a border pattern as marking a moment in the on-going passage of Time.

<sup>59</sup>See Schürmann, O.C., p. 73, for a typical East Asian style of *rinceau*.

<sup>60</sup>For various Caucasian *rinceaux*, see Erdmann, figs. 96, 99, 100, 105, 113, 114, 119, 122, 132, etc.

<sup>61</sup>For *rinceaux* on guard-stripes, see *ibid.*, figs. 33, 34, 37, 111 and 112.

<sup>62</sup>For the misnamed "leaf and winecup" motif, see Erdmann, fig. 108. This was a favorite Kazākh design; for some variants of it, see Raoul Tschébull, *Kazak*, New York, 1971, pls. 16, 18, 28, and 37. The name is inappropriate, because Muslims are forbidden to drink alcohol, and when they do so anyway, they use something sturdier than a thin-stemmed goblet; the "cup" was originally a flower calyx.

<sup>63</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 15, 16, 101, 104, 110 and 120, etc., for examples of discontinuous or broken *rinceaux*, due to careless planning.

<sup>64</sup>For prayer rugs from the Marasālī area of the Shirvān District with the distinctive grape pattern, see Schürmann, O.C., p. 56; S. Reed, fig. 26, p. 33; and Dimand, *Peasant and Nomad Rugs*, p. 59.

<sup>65</sup>Although earthly Time appears to be eternal, going on and on forever, Muslims believe that it is finite and will cease at the Day of Judgement.



one seated at the center of a cosmic rug or carpet could consider himself very favorably situated.

Returning to the symbolism of the Sky-Door: while a door may provide a view of something beyond, it can also bar access. It not only can exclude, or prevent the unauthorized from entering, it can shut things in, too. Thus, by an extension of meaning, the border which was a symbolic gate could also serve symbolically as a kind of fence or barrier. The very insistence of the average rug border—due to its breadth or its complexity, or to highly stressed elements in its design—might easily suggest this; but this meaning is even more forcibly indicated by certain patterns commonly found on the borders of Oriental rugs all the way from West China to Anatolia and the Caucasus.

These usually show a continuous row of projections resembling spear-points facing outwards on the outermost guard-stripe, often matched by a similar set pointing inward on the innermost edge of the border; though two interlocking sets of the same motif, in contrasting colors, may decorate the main border band.<sup>66</sup> (In Persian and Turkish, respectively, this motif is called *modakhel* or *girintilikintili*.<sup>67</sup>) Sometimes the projections are mere triangles arranged in sawtooth fashion; other examples show diamonds jutting from triangles like lance-heads; very often they are sharp-pointed "trefoils" suggesting the upper half of a fleur-de-lys, actually highly conventionalized depictions of the ancient double-headed Sunbird.<sup>68</sup> Regardless of their differing origins, the very shapes of these various kinds of projections makes them look defensive, as though they were meant to ward off something—as indeed they were. Those facing out were symbolically intended to hold at bay any threatening forces or demonic influences exerted by evil jinns; while the inward-pointing ones had a rather different purpose. The latter were symbolically included to restrain, or keep in, the good Spiritual powers associated with the Heavenly pattern of the inner field, to prevent their life-enriching energies from escaping.

In a somewhat less graphic way, the same idea was secondarily conveyed by the floral forms or other principal motifs, on the border, that were shown pointing out—or alternately inward and outward. In addition to their other symbolic functions, these could be considered to be guarding or defending in a similar way. In short, most border patterns carried an idea of dual protection, shielding those who were seated on the rug within, and at the same time sealing in the good influences that could be helpful to them. In view of these intentions, the border constituted a veritable "magic barrier."

<sup>66</sup>See Schürmann, O.C., pp. 46, 48, and 52. For a familiar Kazakh variant, see *ibid.*, p. 45, and for an odd Yarkandi one, see p. 72.

<sup>67</sup>These are merely general descriptive terms, explaining the action of reciprocation, and are not direct names for the motif. Somewhat more precise is the term "cloud-collar points," which we get from Chinese.

<sup>68</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 31 and 82, for two typical examples of the much abbreviated Sunbird, repeated around the outside of the rug as a defensive barrier. Both show the characteristic double-head with two out-curving beaks; the first shows the single eye, while the second provides a better example of the hole through the chest.—The meanings behind these features should become clearer in Part II.

We have just seen that the border patterns in general were far more than meaningless designs, that they usually had a protective connotation, and that one familiar defensive motif on them consisted of conventionalized symbols of the ancient Sunbird. With these things in mind, we can now return to the question of the so-called "Kufic" borders on the Turkish and Caucasian rugs.—Admittedly, these borders had almost nothing to do with Orthodox Islam and its tenets; but they do belong with the abstract patterns that we have been discussing.

The earliest clear examples of the "Kufic" borders are shown on rugs depicted in some miniature paintings of the 14th century A.D. These were done to illustrate a manuscript copy of a famous Arabic book of animal tales, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, preserved at the National Egyptian Library in Cairo. Although the text of this was written in A.D. 1343-44, certain of its paintings are said to have been done a few decades later; but even these can still provide evidence for 14th century life, including the contemporary rug patterns. Three of the pictures portray carpets that have a continuous border design consisting of identical linear motifs, linked together by pairs of short connecting lines to form a continuous succession.<sup>69</sup> Each of the individual motifs has at its center a highly conventionalized Sunbird's-head with beaks hooking out to right and left. Connected to this, and rising vertically at each side, are the equally stylized heads and necks of two dragons, the Sunbird's legendary enemies and prey, both facing inward towards him with menacingly open jaws. The third example shows the double-head at the center raised on a vestigial body, at the center of which is the familiar dot that symbolized the traditional hole through the middle of the Sunbird. (All three rugs have it, but here it is most distinct.) The outline of the head raised on the shouldered body makes a kind of frame which strongly suggests the arch on later Turkish prayer rugs; and this resemblance is more than an accident or coincidence, as we shall see.

Once we recognize these motifs, perhaps we can better understand some much coarser renderings of a similar subject on the borders of a few very old rugs that were rediscovered some years ago in the Mosque of Alā ed-Dīn at Konya, in Anatolia, and supposedly date from the end of the 13th century. The clearest example shows a motif with four upright projections. The middle two were apparently intended for two bird's heads facing each other, a common convention for the Sunbird in place of one double-head; while the two flanking projections, ending in similarly shaped heads, could represent either the opposing dragons or, more likely, the "wing-heads" which were a frequent feature on certain forms of the Sunbird himself.<sup>70</sup> Even if the exact interpretation of the outer elements may still

<sup>69</sup>See Richard Ettinghausen, "New light on Early Animal Carpets," in *Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst* (Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel), Berlin, 1959, figs. 8, 9, 10, pp. 106-108.

<sup>70</sup>The clearest examples of the Konya border design are shown in Erdmann, fig. 1, and Bode and Kühnel, fig. 3, p. 24, at the top of each photograph. At the side of each we see a connected variant. Other, more confused, variations can be seen in Erdmann, figs. 4 (top), and 5 (at right).

elude us, there is unquestionably some close relationship between these motifs and the ones shown in the Egyptian manuscript. Furthermore, we have an actual early, communal prayer rug (*saff*) on which each "niche" is framed by a variation of this device.<sup>71</sup>

On later "Holbein" and "Lotto" rugs from Anatolia, although the style of rendering the border designs resembles that shown in the Cairo miniatures, the dragons are now separate and easier to recognize. They alternate with elements that probably represent highly abbreviated double-Sunbirds. Although the latter are seldom clear enough in themselves to permit sure identification, we do have corroborating clues from certain patterns on other types of rugs.<sup>72</sup>

On later Caucasian rugs from the Shirvân region, the symbolism in the "Kufic" borders again becomes clearer. Individual motifs are once more linked to make a continuous line. When we examine a single one, we find at the center a very typical four-part rendering of the Sunbird (in a "cloud-collar" device) bracketed by two lines each having a stylized dragon-head at either end, giving four dragons in all.<sup>73</sup> This same motif was used individually in the background of certain Caucasian rugs from the same area, along with other forms of conventionalized Sunbird motifs—apparently interchangeable with them.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, the Turkish designers continued to experiment, until finally the symbolic dragons degenerated into ornamental H-figures, and the birds into vague abstractions between them, so the old motif can no longer be recognized (see Fig. 3).<sup>75</sup> However, after the Sunbird disappeared from the borders of these particular Turkish rugs, another, more bird-like form of it came to fill the border cartouches on another type of Anatolian rug, probably woven in

<sup>71</sup>See Reinhard G. Hubel, *The Book of Carpets*, translated by Katherine Watson, New York and Washington, 1970, fig. 4, p. 57. This example, supposed to be from the 15th century, gives a prototype for the very numerous, but even more stylized, "Sunbird-frames" on later Turkish prayer rugs. We shall see that there was an excellent symbolical reason for using the body of the Sunbird to frame the "niche" reserve.

<sup>72</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 26, 35, and 36. In all of these, the dragon with fancy head and ornate tail is reasonably clear; but the double Sunbird has been reduced to two separate elements, except in fig. 36. There it seems possible to make out the typical double-head, short curved wings, and hole through the body, which are among the Sunbird's most basic characteristics. Bode and Kühnel, p. 128, shows a 15th century rug—presumably Persian—with a "Kufic" border in which highly complex four-headed Sunbirds alternate with pairs of interlaced dragons, the latter incorporating the endless-knot device which was then still extremely popular.

<sup>73</sup>See Erdmann, fig. 111, and Schürmann, *O.C.*, pp. 57, 59 and 60.

<sup>74</sup>See Schürmann, *O.C.*, p. 54, in which a pair of these are used individually in a field pattern, in a context of other pairs, of which each unit consists of a double-ended Sunbird symbol flanked by two—or, in one case, by four—highly stylized "dragons" outlined in red. This latter motif is also shown in Tschebull, *Kazak*, pl. 22, in the square reserve in red at the bottom of the pattern; but there the "dragons" are greenish, and the Sunbird is somewhat disarticulated, as well as being greatly simplified.

<sup>75</sup>See Erdmann, figs. 25 and 29, and compare the transitional design in fig. 30, which has the H's but still retains the abbreviated Sunbird element that was used for the older-style border on the rug in fig. 26.

In our fig. 3, above, note that although the border pattern consists mostly of the H's, two stylized dragons crept in at the upper right.



Fig. 5. A "Transylvanian" rug. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Bergama but called "Transylvanian" (see Fig. 5).<sup>76</sup> We shall later return to the topic of the Sunbird, who took a prominent place in Asian rug designs because people thought him a powerful talisman. As such, his presence was believed to give added protection, and furnish more support for the "magic barrier," to help it guard the center.

Thus, we see again, in spite of the strong distinction between field pattern and border on these Islamic rugs, the whole design—the field and border together—made up a symbolically interconnected whole: each part being incomplete without the other, in the overall unity.

<sup>76</sup>The identity of the Sunbird forms on the so-called "Transylvanian" carpets, and the stylistic and symbolic resemblance of these to those on the borders of the Feraghân carpets from Persia (which are usually mis-called "turtles!"), were first noticed by the late Carl Schuster, and discussed in his unpublished work, *The Sunbird*. I hope that I can sometime publish, in his memory, some of the valuable manuscript material that he left regarding Near Eastern rug patterns.

For examples of the "Transylvanian" rugs with this border design, see Bode and Kühnel, figs. 34 and 35, pp. 55 and 56, and *Turkish Rugs*, no. 11. For a much clearer double-headed Sunbird form, on an Ushak border, see F. R. Martin, *A History of Oriental Carpets before 1800*, London, 1908, fig. 265, p. 107.



## Patterns on Prayer Rugs

Islamic religious symbolism found its most complete expression on prayer rugs. Sometime in the 14th century A.D. these small rugs apparently replaced the mats which devout believers had been using to designate "a sacred place" on which to conduct their five sets of daily prayers.<sup>77</sup>

In the first place the traditional designs cut up the pattern into separate areas, which helped to create an effect of the Dissolution of Matter. The breaking down of the rug's surface was still further accomplished by dividing the borders into multiple stripes. This appears in its most extreme form on some of the Old Anatolian rugs from Ghiordes and Kula, which had—along with other border patterns—as many as seven very narrow stripes of the same kind, producing a streaked effect, described in Turkish as *shoboklu* (meaning "combed"), then each of these sub-stripes is further broken down by minute patterning. On some of the same rugs, and on most of the rare Ersārī prayer rugs (described by dealers as "Beshīr"), the patterns are still further disintegrated by having the central field sown with hundreds of tiny stars or flowers, producing an effect described by Turkish rug makers and dealers as *sinekli* (literally, "fly-ed," meaning "scattered like flies").<sup>78</sup> These small patterns, too, generally are cut by the border, under which they can be considered as extending indefinitely, to remind the viewer of infinity and The Infinite.

A characteristic feature of the inner field on most Muslim prayer rugs is an arch, which differs in shape from one area to another: being pointed, stepped, squared off, or expressed in a succession of subtly rounded curves, etc. Regardless of the shape of the inner area set off by this arch, the modern term for it among dealers, curators and collectors is "mihrab." They always explain it as representing the *mihrāb* in a mosque, the prominent recess or niche-shaped plaque on the far wall which marks the *qibla*, the direction of Mecca, toward which the believers must turn their faces when they pray. As a convenient term for describing the form of the arch-shape on a rug, "mihrab" is as good as any other; but it should not be taken as an adequate explanation for its symbolic function. The key to the deeper meaning of of the arch-shaped device on the rugs and the arch surrounding the *mihrāb* in a mosque, or the *mihrāb* itself, is that each of these stood for a gateway.

A notable Cairene prayer rug in the Textile Museum actually bears over its arch an inscription in Hebrew which states, "This is the Gate of the Lord, through which the



Fig. 6. Prayer rug with Hebrew inscription. The Textile Museum. R16.4.4 (R1.62).

righteous enter." (See Fig. 6.)<sup>79</sup>

Portals and gates had great significance in Old Asia,<sup>80</sup> and the concept of a gate has always taken a special prominence in the Islamic cultures. When the cities had strong protecting walls, their gates were often richly outlined (as I write, I recall those of Fez and Meknes, in Morocco); and the gates to palaces and the principal mosques were generally strongly emphasized by decorative frames. We are even told that certain notable rulers were accustomed to receiving foreign ambassadors while sitting inside a gate.<sup>81</sup> Here again, we have a concept that was very old in the Near East before the coming of Islām. For example, the name of the ancient city of Babylon (*Bāb ilāni*) meant "Gate of the Gods," assuming that at this place the gods came down to make contact with men.

The first *mihrābs* in mosques were merely blocks let into the back wall to indicate the *qibla* but gradually they came to assume the arch shape and take on some idea of a Divine Gate, or at least a "gate of prayer" towards which—or through which—prayers should be directed. The connection between a *mihrāb* and a gate proper becomes more obvious when we read that most of the *mihrābs* in the

<sup>77</sup>The earliest evidence for a prayer rug in the familiar form appears in two paintings in the Arabic book in Cairo which was discussed above. See Ettinghausen, *op. cit.* (in note 69), p. 107, and fig. 11, p. 111.

<sup>78</sup>For Turkish prayer rugs with *shoboklu* borders, see Erdmann, fig. 164; Dilley, pl. XLVIII, lower left; and S. Reed, fig. 17, p. 26.

For Turkish examples of *sinekli* prayer rugs, see Mohamed Mostafa, *Turkish Prayer Rugs* (a guidebook to the collections in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo), Cairo, 1953, pls. VII.2 and XII. For Ersari examples, see Schürmann, O.C., p. 71, and C. D. Reed, *Turkoman Rugs*, no. 43, p. 47.

<sup>79</sup>This rug is described in Charles Grant Ellis, "The Ottoman Prayer Rugs," *Textile Museum Journal*, Vol. II, no. 4, December 1969, text p. 14, and pictured in fig. 19, p. 15.

<sup>80</sup>A great mass of West Asian door-lore and gate-symbolism has been assembled by J. A. MacCulloch for the article "Door," in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IV, New York and Edinburgh, 1912, p. 846 ff. He explains the significance of doors and gates as magic barriers. He also explains that sacred symbols are affixed to doors as a powerful means of protection, referring especially to the swastika, which also was used on the borders of many rugs. This also would account for the extensive use of the Sunbird on rug borders, and on or around the "niche" on prayer rugs, both of which were considered as symbolic doors.

<sup>81</sup>See Hoag, *Western Islamic Architecture*, pp. 16, and 45-46.



Fig. 7. A mazarlik prayer rug. The Textile Museum. T.M.1971.23.22.

mosques of the Maghreb (Northwest Africa) were modelled on a single gate: the portal to the library of the Great Mosque at Qairouan in Tunisia.<sup>82</sup>

On certain Old Anatolian prayer rugs, notably the older Ghiordes and early Ladik rugs, we find a parapet above the arch, like the topping of a wall, such as one would never find inside a mosque.<sup>83</sup> On some of these, tulip plants spring up from beyond the wall, while on others trees, plants, or sprinkled flowers are growing beyond the arch as well.<sup>84</sup> These recall Persian or Mughal prayer rugs, or "niche" patterns on larger rugs—or on other textiles, book-covers, wall-tiling, etc.—that show floral displays, even gardens, behind the symbolic gate.<sup>85</sup> Certainly, in the latter cases, at least, the opening must be representing the Gate to

<sup>82</sup>See E. Diez, "Mihrāb," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. III, Leiden and London, 1936, p. 488.

<sup>83</sup>For prayer rugs with obvious architectural gates, see Schürmann, O.C., p. 19 (two examples); Erdmann, fig. 160; Bode and Kühnel, fig. 36, p. 57; and Dilley, pl. XLVI.

<sup>84</sup>See *Turkish Rugs*, nos. 50, 56, and 60 (not in order).

<sup>85</sup>For two outstanding examples in color, see the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition catalogue, *Islamic Carpets in the Joseph V. McMullan Collection*, New York, 1970, nos. 15 and 16. See also S. Reed, fig. 32, p. 36.

Paradise, giving glimpses of the Celestial Gardens so frequently mentioned in the Koran.

In this holy book, one of the more specific passages describing Heaven (in surah 55), speaks of Paradise as containing two gardens, then two more, making four in all.<sup>86</sup> This scriptural citation had an enormous influence on Persian and Muslim Indian architectural planning, and these Four Gardens of Paradise were also reproduced symbolically on a whole class of Persian rugs; but this symbolism apparently also found expression on one class of Anatolian prayer rugs (see Fig. 7). These are the ones familiarly known under the name *mazarlik*, a Turkish word meaning "pertaining to cemeteries."<sup>87</sup> Modern Turkish and Armenian dealers use this term because they think that the characteristic scene depicted on these represents a cemetery, although it bears no resemblance at all to the traditional Ottoman cemeteries from the time when these rugs were being woven. The central "niche" area encloses a wall from which flowers are sprouting, with an open gateway at the bottom.<sup>88</sup> Inside this enclosure are four or more repeated figures, each one a small scene showing little houses under flowering trees (not just cypresses typically grown in Turkish graveyards) and, in the foreground, flower beds beneath which are narrow strips of stylized water representing streams.—These streams are shown beneath the flower beds and trees, but not below the entire figure.

An imaginative modern Egyptian museum director accepted the popular term for these rugs, which associated them with death; but he was not satisfied with the usual explanation. He saw the repeated figures as being in the shape of little boats, with their bushy trees as masts bearing sails, and he went on to say, "If it is true that these ornamental motifs represent cemeteries, we can conclude that the ship design is of Greek origin, because the Greeks believed that the soul is transferred in a ship to the future life after death."<sup>89</sup> This is a most unlikely suggestion. In the first place, modern Greeks of the 19th and early 20th century, when these rugs were being woven, no longer believed in Charon ferrying souls across the Styx, and it does not seem likely that they would be making prayer rugs for Muslims, either. But, more significantly, the stylized streams of water are rendered within each little scene, the latter does not ride upon them.

It seems more probable that the small figures on these *mazarlik* prayer rugs are highly stylized "gardens 'neath which waters flow", the Gardens of Paradise, which are so

<sup>86</sup>Koran, surah 55, verses 46 and 62. See M. M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (A Mentor Religious Classic), New York, 1955, p. 383.

<sup>87</sup>Two of the best examples of mazarlik prayer rugs are shown in Mohamed Mostafa's *Turkish Prayer Rugs*, pl. XVIII. A somewhat atypical one, combining the flowers of Paradise with no less than fifteen "gardens" is shown in Dilley, pl. XLVIII, lower left. A nice one (absurdly dated) is shown in R. de Calatchi, *Oriental Carpets*, pl. 47.

<sup>88</sup>The same kind of gateway-opening at the bottom may be seen on Turkish prayer rugs of other types: See *Turkish Rugs*, pp. 24 and 25 for examples.

<sup>89</sup>Mohamed Mostafa, in *Turkish Prayer Rugs*, p. 21.



frequently described this way in the Koran.<sup>90</sup> On the earliest examples of this pattern there seem to have been just four of the figures, but later rugs show them in varying numbers.<sup>91</sup> The little houses are also consistent with such an interpretation, because the Traditions report the Prophet as having said that when a man erects a mosque upon the Earth for Allah, Allah will build an abode for him in Paradise.<sup>92</sup>

The concept of the Four Gardens of Paradise also gives us a key for understanding the highly stylized Turkoman prayer rugs popularly known as "katchlis".<sup>93</sup> The Old Turkish *khachlu* (modern *hachli*), from which this commercial name was taken, simply means "crossed", or "having a cross", and it was applied to these rugs because one principal type had a cross-shaped device at the center of the field. But this is a beautiful example of the tendency for outsiders to emphasize the wrong thing in a traditional pattern. The cross has no meaning in itself, it simply marks off the Four Gardens of Paradise, as seen through a door or gate: the gardens were indicated by highly stylized plants and trees, and sometimes had wavy lines that probably stood for watercourses.

One very characteristic type of "katchli" from the Panjdeh District of Russian Turkestan has no cross, simply a short horizontal panel separating two "gardens" inside a fenced enclosure, with two more "gardens" arranged vertically on each side, to make the required four.<sup>94</sup> Exactly the same arrangement on a pictorial "garden rug" from 17th century Persia would seem to provide evidence for a possible prototype, as well as helping to support this interpretation of the meaning.<sup>95</sup>

Some Western collectors claim that these "katchlis" were also used as door hangings,<sup>96</sup> and speak vaguely of some

local name that might suggest that.<sup>97</sup> If there is indeed a Turkoman word for these that involves the idea of "door", it is probably a descriptive term referring to the pattern as showing a door or gate through which to see Paradise. I have never seen an illustration of a Turkoman tent using such a rug for a door-flap, and, as long as the faith was alive such a use for a prayer rug would be unthinkable. Lastly, in most cases, they would be the wrong size to fit a Turkoman's door.

The arch design, then, could symbolize the Gate of Prayer, or the Gate to Paradise in Inmost Heaven beyond the Sky Door; but the latter for certain Muslim mystics—the Sūfis in particular—was also the Gate of Knowledge or Divine Wisdom, referred to as the "Sun-Gate". In Central Asia this Sun-Gate was frequently symbolized by a double-headed Sunbird with a hole through his body, a device which was progressively stylized—as we shall later see—until it became virtually unrecognizable, with only vestiges of its original shape. A characteristic vestige or survival of the Sunbird was a single head with a central eye and a curved beak extending out at each side, or merely two outward-curving beaks alone. Another type had two separate heads—facing toward, or away from, each other—which may become reduced to latch-hooks. The double-head, or heads, of this bird can be seen at the top of the arch on many Anatolian prayer rugs,<sup>98</sup> and—in even more stylized forms—at the same place on the Ersārī "Beshīr" prayer rugs.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the "arch" itself, in these cases, apparently stands for the actual body of the Sunbird,<sup>100</sup> the open center of which symbolized the Sun-Gate proper.

On some prayer rugs, the arch does seem to be framing a niche: when a lamp is shown hanging within it.<sup>101</sup> However, this does not have to represent a mosque's mihrāb niche. (Western claims that it does so simply reflect reasoning from Christian analogies, recalling sanctuary lights in Catholic churches. Such lamps are not usually found inside a mihrāb, though some Persian mosques may show the

side nearest Mecca, as substitutes for the mihrab of the mosque." Possibly it was just the presence of these loops that suggested to Westerners that they must have been hung in doorways.

<sup>97</sup>Schürmann, who refers to this category of rugs as "hatchlou," also uses the term *engsi*, which he says means "door hanging," to refer to some of them, even using the mixed term "hatchlou engsi," but he does not seem to agree with the "door hanging" theory; see his C.A.S., p. 34, last paragraph.

<sup>98</sup>In *Turkish Rugs*, nos. 49, 59, 61, 62, 63, and 76, show the Sunbird's single-head type, with the two beaks projecting outward at each side, while nos. 26, 27, and 28, show the alternative form, with two heads, in this case facing inward toward each other. Fig. 61 is especially interesting, as it shows one conventionalized Sunbird-gate inside another. This arrangement is comparatively frequent in Asian symbolism, and may imply deeper entry, or a greater depth of penetration: i.e. access to Innermost Paradise or to deeper Wisdom.

<sup>99</sup>See Schürmann, O.C., p. 71, Dille, pl. LV, upper left, and C. D. Reed, *Turkoman Rugs*, fig. 43, p. 47. The last two give examples of one conventionalized Sunbird inside another. But the best example is R. G. Hubel, *The Book of Carpets*, color plate 22, p. 251.

<sup>100</sup>The complete figure is sometimes repeated in a panel above the arch on Mujur prayer rugs. See *Turkish Rugs*, figs. 61 and 62; see also note 71 above.

<sup>101</sup>See Bode and Kühnel, fig. 28, p. 50, and fig. 53, p. 81, for rugs with a lamp.

<sup>90</sup>The actual references to this often-repeated phrase in the Koran are too numerous to cite; but in this connection see Hoag, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup>*Turkish Prayer Rugs*, pl. XVIII, left, shows four gardens and a mosque, in the earlier fashion, while S. Reed, fig. 12, p. 20, shows a late example with 32 gardens. As the figures become more cramped, the houses might look more like grave-mounds, but the presence of the flowery Tree of Paradise among them, beyond the Gate, is the best indication of the intended meaning.

<sup>92</sup>Osman, the third Caliph, reported that the Prophet had said this. See Maulana Fazlul Karim, *Al-Hadīs*, Book III, Calcutta, 1940, p. 214.

<sup>93</sup>Two examples of the typical Yomud type of "katchli," which actually does contain a cross-design, are shown in Schürmann C.A.S., pls. 28 and 29. The bottom panel on these is often shown in blue (the sky color) as shown on the second example here, so the main part of the pattern is figuratively "above the sky," i.e. in Heaven.

<sup>94</sup>This second type of "katchli" does not have a true cross-design. It simply has a short transverse panel, and two vertical "doors" (one in each of the two middle "gardens") which usually do not intersect with the center panel. Rugs of this type have been attributed to the Saryk tribe and to the Kyzyl Ayak (by Schürmann), but in any case they are from the district called Panjdeh, which appears in numerous Western variations, such as Pendeh and Pinde.

<sup>95</sup>This Persian garden rug with variant plan is shown in Bode and Kühnel, fig. 104, p. 143.

<sup>96</sup>C. D. Reed presents a fine Yomud example under the label "Yomud prayer rug or door hanging," *Turkoman Rugs*, no. 33, p. 44. He mentions (in *ibid.* p. 14) "Many [Turkoman] prayer rugs at their upper corners have loops made so that the rugs could hang from tent walls, perhaps on the

picture of a lamp within one.) The usual meaning of this motif is a reference to the 24th surah of the Koran, which says, "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The symbol of His Light is a niche in which is a lamp."<sup>102</sup> However, a lamp was also used as symbol of the Divine Wisdom which is to be apprehended through the Sun-Gate, and in some cases the lamp seems obviously hanging in an open gateway. Also, the Koran elsewhere speaks of the Sun as a lamp in Heaven, and once it calls the Prophet himself "a lamp that giveth light."<sup>103</sup> Thus, the lamp could be suggesting several different ideas simultaneously.

Quite frequently, on old Anatolian Prayer rugs the pictured lamp becomes—or is replaced by—an upside-down vase or ewer, often holding flowers which droop downward from it.<sup>104</sup> Why are these shown inverted? Also, why do we find, on many late Ladik prayer rugs, that the crenelated wall, formerly shown atop the arch, is now located upside-down beneath it, while the tulips that once sprang up between the crenels now dangle downward toward the bottom of the rug?<sup>105</sup>

Apparently, many of the later Anatolian prayer rugs were woven "wrongside-up"; that is, the weavers began with the top of the rug-to-be, and worked upward toward the bottom of the pattern. They probably did this very deliberately; so, when the worshipper was required to slide his hands forward on the rug at one stage in his prayers, they would glide freely with the lay of the pile, without meeting any resistance. But it would seem that these weavers sometimes forgot they were working from the opposite end, so they wove some of the details of the pattern—such as vases and ewers, flowers and trees, wall-tops and gate-columns—right side up. Then, when the rug was finally completed, these turned out upside-down in relation to the rest of the total design. —By the time these rugs were woven, the old traditions were dying, so perhaps no one noted these discrepancies, or would have cared.

Incidentally, the vases and ewers depicted on prayer rugs were not merely "ritual vessels," as Western writers have generally assumed. They were primarily symbols of

life-giving water, and could even have been referring to "the waters of Paradise," though some mundane Muslim might still regard one more prosaically as a reminder to do his ritual washing before prayer. Much the same could be said about the objects on some Caucasian prayer rugs that have been called "combs".<sup>106</sup> These ambiguous figures, consisting of many short, slender lines descending from a horizontal unit, have been described as combs by Westerners, with the comment that they were placed on the rugs to remind a worshipper to arrange his beard before praying.<sup>107</sup> This explanation seems inadequate; because, although the shape of the motif could of course remind someone to comb his hair and beard, it can be found in different contexts on other rugs where it could not possibly be referring to personal neatness.<sup>108</sup> It seems more likely that this was once a very ancient symbol of rain descending from the sky, which originally connoted life-giving waters, just as the vase or ewer did.<sup>109</sup> Anyhow, until this can be fully checked by further examples presenting it in a more revealing context, we might as well disregard this particular figure. After all, it is only a non-essential filler element in a pattern that is already a meaningful whole: a symbol of the Gate to Paradise as seen through the wider frame of the Sky-Door.

Another symbolic item on the prayer rugs that has been falsely explained by Western writers is the pair of hands quite frequently shown above the "shoulders" of the arch on Caucasian or Baluchi examples.<sup>110</sup> Popular rug lore says that they were put there to show the worshipper where to place his own hands during prayer. However, in the course of the rites the worshipper would first lay his hands lower down on the rug, then slide them forward; and he did not need marks to tell him where to stop. For a member of the Shi'a sect these would represent the hands of the martyr Hussein.<sup>111</sup> But the sets of five fingers could also recall Allah and the Four Archangels, Muhammad and the first four Caliphs, or the revered members of the Family of

<sup>106</sup>For prayer rugs with "combs," see S. Reed, figs. 28, 29, and 30, pp. 34 and 35.

<sup>107</sup>Some Western writers, while stating that the comb was included for this purpose, have also suggested that the object might represent a weaver's comb (for beating down the weft). But the latter would have had a heavy handle, and in this kind of stylized yet literal representation the weaver would have made some effort to show that; yet this has not been done. In any case, that would have had no symbolic meaning whatever in the context of a prayer rug. (S. Reed, p. 25 and Hawley, *op. cit.*, p. 67, both cite the weaver's comb idea.)

<sup>108</sup>See Hawley, *op. cit.*, pl. 42, facing p. 181, where every alternate row of conventionalized flowers is set off by "combs." See also *ibid.*, pl. 40, facing p. 173, where several "combs" are scattered in the background. Unfortunately, in neither case does the context provide clues to possible meanings for this minor motif. Since it is minor, it should not greatly concern us; but it is precisely this kind of non-essential "filler" that has previously drawn most attention from Western writers.

<sup>109</sup>See Anna Roes, "Der Hallstattvogel," *Ipek*, Vol. 13, 1940, pp. 79-80.

<sup>110</sup>S. Reed, figs. 29 and 30, p. 35, shows two Caucasian rugs from Daghestan with the pairs of hands. See also Hubel, *Book of Carpets*, fig. 34, p. 105.

<sup>111</sup>This is not simply a double presentation of "the Hand of Fatima." That motif is characteristically shown singly.

<sup>102</sup>Koran, 24.25-36. See Pickthall, *The Glorious Koran*, p. 256. See also Hoag, *Western Islamic Architecture*, p. 48, for comments.

<sup>103</sup>Koran, 71.15-16, and 33.45-46. See Pickthall, *ibid.*, pp. 415, 305 and 408. Muhammad was called a lamp because he "illuminated" the way toward Allah.

<sup>104</sup>For the inverted flower vase, see *Turkish Rugs*, nos. 38 and 40. Schürmann, O.C., p. 22, shows an ambiguous case wherein the "lamp" is at the same time an upside-down flower vase.

In Erdmann, fig. 164, and in Dilley, pl. XLVII (the two bottom rugs), we see the Celestial Tree growing upside down. Some Muslim accounts say that the Tree of Paradise grows downward from Heaven; but then what do we make of the tree on the rug shown in Erdmann fig. 166, which is growing upright beyond the gate?

The spouted ewers called *ibrik* are shown inverted in *Turkish Rugs*, no. 63, while the example in Hawley, *Oriental Rugs*, pl. 35, facing p. 149, shows inverted ewers both in the spandrels and in the central reserve. However, S. Reed, fig. 11, p. 18, shows an example which has the ewers going both ways.

<sup>105</sup>For examples of prayer rugs with this architectural confusion, see Hawley, *ibid.*, color plate VII; Dilley, pl. XLVIII, upper left; or *Turkish Rugs*, nos. 52 and 53.



the Prophet (Muhammad himself, his daughter Fatima, Ali, who was his nephew, adopted son, and son-in-law, and his grandsons, Hasan and Hussein).<sup>112</sup> They could also remind a believer of the Five Ritual Obligations and five sessions of daily prayer.<sup>113</sup> However, the belief that a red hand mark gives magical protection against evil was current in Asia for centuries—perhaps millenia—before the founding of Islam, and still persists.<sup>114</sup> A Muslim is relatively defenseless while concentrating on his prayers, and extra protection against jinns was always welcome. This, then, was probably the basic reason for the hands.

These last items, along with several previous ones, have illustrated the fact that some of the symbols on the rugs could be interpreted in several ways. When a modern Westerner first hears that a given symbol could have a number of possible meanings, he is apt to retort, "O.K., but which is the *real* meaning?" Such a question shows how far we have lost any understanding of the ways and functions of symbols. While the language of symbols was still a living thing, a single symbol in a given culture might carry a whole succession of meanings.<sup>115</sup> (In general, the simpler the symbol, the more meanings; because the elaborate ones tended to be more specific.) When such a multivalent symbol was seen within a given culture, many people would doubtless have been satisfied with its immediate surface suggestions; others might dig further, out of curiosity to find what else it could mean; while more receptive minds could move on effortlessly to reach still deeper—or higher—levels of meaning, as expanding waves of intuition drew them on in search of profounder truths.<sup>116</sup>

In short, there could often be more than one "real" meaning. The main point is that the "extra" ones had to rise spontaneously within the tradition that was using the symbol, and they had to be consistent with the laws already established by the language of symbols in that area. Again, it was a matter of the culture as a whole. For this reason, to reach any full understanding of the symbols on the rugs and their meanings, we must carefully consider the environment in which—and for which—they were first produced.

It helps to recall that a single rug often served as the only form of decoration in a house or tent, and that the village mosque was often strictly plain except for the rugs scattered on its floor. Thus, rugs were usually the only things

<sup>112</sup>These "Five Holy Ones" of the Prophet's Family are named in the most frequent of the Shi'a prayers, so some symbolic reference to them might expected on a Shi'a's prayer rug.

<sup>113</sup>The Five Ritual Obligations were: Belief in the Oneness of God, and public statement of it; Prayer, five times daily; Fasting, in the month of Ramadān; Pilgrimage to Mecca; Alms-giving, and charity to the poor.

<sup>114</sup>See MacCulloch, "Door," p. 849, 3c.

<sup>115</sup>For some idea of the number of possible associations behind one symbol, see E. B. Smith, *The Dome*, Princeton, N.J., 1971, pp. 5, 7, and 80, giving meanings for the dome.

<sup>116</sup>On the other hand, people in a traditional culture do not always have to look for the deeper meaning in a symbol; often they apprehend this intuitively, with no conscious effort on their part. A given symbol may just suddenly trigger a thought in a deeper level of the mind. In this connection, read the important comments by Carl Schuster, in "Some Comparative Considerations about Western Asiatic Carpet Designs," *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 9, 1946, pp. 90-92.

people had to look at. In the absence of any other furniture, they sat on them, ate upon them, visited on them, and slept on them; so, consciously or not, their eyes were constantly being attracted to study the patterns.

An individual could view them in new ways from time to time, receiving new ideas and impressions from them as his mind moved from the conventional meanings to more subjective ones, and back again. Yet he would always be finding meanings within the frame of his own culture, as he was unlikely to know anything else. What a person saw in the rug patterns at any given time would depend upon his temperament or even his mood at the moment. It was not a question of education, because illiterate people tend to be more observant, and many of them are shrewdly wise, with a kind of natural wisdom.

Mankind everywhere has always been awed by the immensity of the Universe and its latent powers. Even when men tried to make the Universe more manageable or comprehensible by reducing it to smaller models, sudden storms, flash floods, or destructive earthquakes would suddenly remind them of forces far beyond the mightiest human efforts. Yet to the star-watchers in particular—and in the mountains or the desert everyone is to some extent a sky-gazer—there seems to be an observable sense of purpose behind the activities of Nature. Such things excite man's wonder, while eluding his knowledge. The average Westerner is inclined to disregard or thrust aside what he cannot immediately understand, or at least comprehend theoretically on the basis of scientific investigation; but the people of the East have had more leisure to meditate upon these things, and more inclination to do so.

However, human nature everywhere shows great diversity. Within the Islamic tradition—just as in the Eastern Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu traditions—there have always been deeply reflective, spiritually-minded people who saw and interpreted everything as "intimations of Immortality," in contrast to others, solely material-minded, who were so involved in everyday matters, or so oppressed by poverty, that they gave little thought to anything beyond ways of acquiring money, public attention, or power. Then, of course, there was the large middle group, consisting of ordinary people who might think at times in either way. On the whole, though, the Orient has had, until recently, far greater numbers of people in the first of these categories. This was partly because Easterners in general enjoyed a more leisurely, slower-paced life-style that afforded more time for reflection on the deeper things of life, and partly because they were closer to Nature and had less control of it, so they were more often impressed with its powers. It was quite natural that such reflective people would be inclined to express their thought creatively in art and architecture and in the patterns of the rugs on which they were compelled to spend so much of their time.

In such an atmosphere, for rugs intended to be used in mosques and in ordinary homes, the more abstract patterns would have been especially suitable. Quite apart from the general message in their overall design, which we

have been trying to uncover, the lesser motifs and subordinate elements of the patterns could be interpreted in different ways, at various times, by those who regularly saw them at close quarters. Probably that is another reason why the mosque officials and the common people preferred rugs with the simpler, abstract designs, in contrast to the more representational patterns favored by the kings, nobles, and courtiers, who sponsored the Palace Art.

The people who designed and wove the village rugs or tribal rugs generally came from the most conservative and most actively religious or superstitious stratum of Islamic society. By contrast, the designers of the Palace carpets had more freedom, not being so rigidly bound by religious prejudices and legalistic strictures—though they might have been more truly religious in a higher sense, since many of them were Sūfīs. In the next article we shall see how fundamentally the Sūfī concepts influenced the Persian rug patterns; but the ideas and values of the humbler designers and weavers had a far wider effect on the patterns of Islamic rugs in general, so our first steps toward trying to understand the meanings in the patterns had to concentrate mostly on the products of their more pious, but less sophisticated minds.

# SYMBOLIC MEANINGS IN ORIENTAL RUG PATTERNS: Part II

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